ST. LOUIS METRO NEWS

St. Louis County Drug Task Force Provides 70-Word "Record" of Quarterly Meeting

By Danny Wicentowski

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St. Louis county's drug task force: Good at busting criminals, bad at holding oversight meetings.

About six months ago, we posed a simple question:

"Where," we asked, "are the oversight records for St. Louis County's drug task force?"

The records in question had proved elusive to Aaron Malin, a researcher for Show-Me Cannabis. Although Show-Me Cannabis is largely occupied with pushing a ballot initiative to legalize marijuana, Malin's job also involves amassing data on the region's drug task forces, including that of St. Louis County.

Yesterday, the task force provided Malin with the minutes of its quarterly meeting, something he had been seeking since January.

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But instead of a detailed summary of task force activities, the document Malin received clocked in at just 70 words. And aside from the roll call at the March 19, 2015 meeting, the document presents virtually no content. One bullet point reads, "Talked about new building to house detectives." Another merely states, "Dispersed asset forfeiture checks."

"We wanted to know what task force is doing, what their operational functions are, what their duties are and what they've been doing for the last three to six months," Malin says. "It seems they made up a couple of bullet points for the sake of having something to send us."

Here's the full document the task force provided Malin:

Minutes From 1st Quarter 2015 Drug Task Force Meeting

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Minutes from the 03-19-2015 Multi-Jurisdictional Drug Task Force Quarterly Meeting

1.) Attendance
- Commander Captain Kurt Frisz
- Deputy Commander Lieutenant Jason Law
- Ballwin Police Chief Steve Schicker
- Bellefontaine Neighbors Police Chief Robert Pruett
- Ferguson acting Police Chief Al Eickhoff
- Manchester Police Chief Timothy Walsh

2.) Discussion
- Talked about new building to house detectives
- Talked about personnel and accountability
- Dispersed asset forfeiture checks

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See also: *Police Block Public From Drug Task Force Meeting [VIDEO]*

For comparison, Malin shared with us meeting minutes from the St. Charles County Regional Drug Task Force, which he obtained through an open-records request. Unlike St. Louis County's offering, this document includes a breakdown of cases tackled, the number of guns confiscated by the DEA and updates on task force finances.

This, says Malin, is what a record of meeting minutes *should* look like:

St Charles Meeting Minutes

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ST. CHARLES COUNTY REGIONAL DRUG TASK FORCE
Board of Governors Regular Session Minutes
Wednesday, December 10, 2014

The Board of Governors of the St. Charles County Regional Drug Task Force held their regular meeting on Wednesday, December 10 at the Sheriff's Department Conference Room located at 101 Sheriff Dierker Court – O'Fallon, Mo 63366

1. **Call to Order**

   Chief Lewis called the meeting to order at 12:10 P.M.

2. **Roll Call**

   Lindsay Jones, Recording Secretary called the roll:

Chief Lewis	Present
Sheriff Neer	Present
Chief Force	Present
Chief Finkelstein	Present
Chief Joachimstaler	Present
Chief Harrison	Absent
Chief McKinley	Absent

Also present: Command[redacted] Homer Markhart, and John Nave.
Major West was present in lieu of Chief Harrison.

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Malin had previously requested records of task force's meetings going back to 2012, but up until now, police officials claimed those meetings were "informal" and that no minutes were recorded -- meaning there were no records available to give researchers like Malin.

The meeting record provided to Malin (all 70 words of it) suggests that the March meeting might be the first documented oversight meeting held by the drug task force in more than three years. But there's a darker possibility: Malin fears that the powers-that-be could have hastily concocted the minutes to mollify him after the fact.

"They appear to be sham minutes, fake minutes," he says of the document. "That's what they put together and called minutes. That's supposed to suffice as oversight."

The St. Louis County drug task force is no fly-by-night organization. It reported a 2012 budget of $3.7 million. Like other drug task forces, the unit can legally seize the property of suspected drug criminals and use the cash to pad their budgets.

Yet the region's 24 drug task forces have largely resisted calls for transparency, prompting Show-Me Cannabis to file complaints with the Attorney General's Office. To date, the organization has filed lawsuits against five drug task forces over alleged violations of Missouri's Sunshine law.

Update 3:40 p.m.: We reached out to St. Louis County Police Department spokesman Sergeant Brian Schellman in the hope that he could explain why the meeting minutes provided by the drug task force were so brief.

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Schellman's emailed response is short and to the point:

"Minutes were taken in accordance with the Missouri State Sunshine Law Chapter 610," he writes.

However, a cursory glance at Missouri State Sunshine Law Chapter 610 doesn't appear to support drug task force's side. Here's the pertinent statute: (Bold is ours.)

> A journal or minutes of open and closed meetings shall be taken and retained by the public governmental body, including, but not limited to, a record of any votes taken at such meeting. **The minutes shall include the date, time, place, members present, members absent and a record of any votes taken.** When a roll call vote is taken, the minutes shall attribute each "yea" and "nay" vote or abstinence if not voting to the name of the individual member of the public governmental body.

Clearly, the two bullet-pointed paragraphs offered by the county's drug task force omits several requirements outlined in the statute, including the time and location of the meeting, a list of absent members and notations for any votes that were held.

Dave Roland, an attorney at Show-Me Cannabis, says the county task force's meeting minutes just don't measure up to the law's requirements.

"This seems to be a plain effort to cover up the fact that they violated the Sunshine Law by not taking minutes at all," he says.

See also: *Missouri Drug Task Forces Seize a Lot of Money and Don't Keep Close Records Of Where it Goes*

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